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Shuttle Disaster Shouldn't Stop Research On Star Wars, General Urges Legislators

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WASHINGTON—A few hours after the space shuttle Challenger exploded, killing all seven crew members, Air Force Lt. Gen. James Abrahamson met with lawmakers and urged them not to let the disaster deter U.S. space programs, in particular the Strategic Defense Initiative.

The session was a scheduled briefing by Gen. Abrahamson on the Defense Department's SDI, the so-called Star Wars antimissile program, which he heads. But the shuttle disaster altered the agenda. Gen. Abrahamson suggested that some lawmakers, shaken by the disaster, might push to cut funding for the controversial SDI effort, the centerpiece of President Reagan's national security program.

The links between the shuttle program and the anti-missile research project are both tangible and symbolic. The SDI organization had been counting on the shuttle for several space-based experiments, and as the accelerated research effort progresses, its dependence on the shuttle will increase. More abstractly, the shuttle disaster shakes leaders' confidence that the U.S. can develop the technology to construct and operate the multilayered defense against missiles in space.

On a personal level, Gen. Abrahamson ran the space shuttle program at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration before taking on the top Star Wars job more than a year ago.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger has been meeting with top aides to assess the shuttle disaster's effect on the Pentagon's space projects, according to department officials. But a spokesman noted that the Pentagon won't know how big a problem exists until NASA says how long the shuttle will be out of commission.

"I don't see how it can't have an effect on SDI," one Senate staff member said. "The shuttle has been used again and again as an example of how high-technology can succeed."

The Star Wars program, aimed at creating a leak-proof shield that would destroy nuclear missiles in space, is considered to be vastly more complex than the space shuttle. In the opinion of many scientists, it is the single greatest technological challenge ever undertaken. "This reinforces the reasoned skeptics who say we shouldn't be too optimistic about early results," the staff member added.

Overall, the Reagan administration plans to spend about $26 billion over five or six years to research the prospect of space-based defenses.

Critics of the SDI program contend that the shuttle disaster casts further doubt on whether the SDI project will ever work. "The shuttle is an easier task by an order of magnitude," said Alice Tepper Marlin, executive director of the Council on Economic Priorities, a group of economists who oppose Star Wars. "Nobody was trying to sabotage the shuttle, everybody wants it to succeed. With SDI, the enemy is motivated to try to foil it."

Concern Over Experiment

According to congressional staff members, the most immediate concern is how the Pentagon will conduct an experiment on infrared surveillance and optics known as "Teal Ruby." The tests originally were scheduled to be run this July from a shuttle launched from Vandenberg Air Force base in California. Beyond this experiment, the SDI program likely will require about five shuttle launches each year through 1995, top Pentagon officials said.

The strongest supporters of the SDI program don't believe the Challenger incident will result in much of a setback. George Keyworth, a former science adviser to President Reagan, noted that "we are still years away from having to put massive objects into space." If a strategic defense system ever is deployed, there will be dozens of surveillance systems and weapons placed in space to intercept and destroy nuclear missiles.

In the meantime, he said, smaller payloads can be sent into space on throwaway rockets. Several months ago, the SDI organization used a rocket to conduct a laser experiment in space.

Routine Surveillance

However, the SDI project isn't the Pentagon's only concern now that the shuttle program is on hold. The Defense Department depends on an array of space-based equipment to perform routine surveillance functions and provide early warnings of attack during a crisis. "If we were to lose the shuttle or space access for a year or two, the consequences would be serious," said Mr. Keyworth. But he added, "I don't think that's in the cards."

The Pentagon is buying a Titan rocket system, produced by Martin Marietta Corp., that will serve as an alternate to the shuttle. However, the first of these rockets won't be delivered until 1988, and the Pentagon plans to buy only 10 Titans.

In the past, Congress gave only grudging approval to the Titan backup program, partly out of fear that it would compete with the shuttle or deprive the program of needed revenue from the military. Now, says an aide to a Senate supporter of the shuttle, "this gives a great boost to the expendable launch vehicles."